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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, August 5, 1937.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "CHIGGERS". Information from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Friends, I have chosen a painful subject for my talk today. At least it's painful to me, and I daresay a number of you have had a similar experience. If you haven't, I can at least give you fair warning as to what you may expect and what to do about it.

We planned such a nice family picnic last Saturday, in a spot we all like, where we can drive the car right into a grove of trees beside a little shallow stream, not too deep for wading. The lunch was extra good - chicken salad sandwiches and chocolate layer cake were its highlights. After it was eaten, we grown-ups loafed on the grass and read or talked or napped. The children played ball and paddled in the creek and explored the nearby woods. It wasn't until I was putting them to bed that the horrid state of affairs was revealed.

"I itch," said Tommy. "My legs itch. And under my arms. And..."

"I itch, too," said George, who always echoes everything Tom says. "My legs itch and my tummy itches."

At that moment I discovered--well, I won't go any further into the distressing details. We had all been sitting or lying on the ground, - and we all itched from countless small red spots, which a magnifying glass showed beyond a doubt to be,--you've guessed it,--chiggers.

If we'd only known we were going to be exposed to chiggers, we could have taken precautions before starting. Dusting our legs and underwear with flowers of sulphur would have given us pretty fair protection. (Flowers of sulphur is the name of an inexpensive powder you can buy at the drugstore.)

And if we'd realized it immediately afterwards, we could all have taken hot baths with strong soap as soon as we got home. As it was, we were a little late with the baths, but we had them anyway, and then I tried applying everything I could think of for insect bites - ammonia water, soda and water paste, strong salt water, and cooling ointments. It was hard to keep the children from scratching, and as a special safeguard I painted the worst scratched spots with a red antiseptic. It's funny how an irritating little thing like a chigger, hardly as big as the point of a pin, can inject enough poison to keep you awake at night. Anyway, ours kept us awake.

So I asked Dr. F. C. Bishopp of the Federal Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, in the U. S. Department of Agriculture, to tell me something about the season for chiggers and how to avoid the suffering they cause.

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"If they are not too small a matter for you to bother about," I said.

"But all insects are small," Dr. Bishopp pointed out. "And chiggers are extremely aggravating, because the few weeks when they are most active are just the weeks when the warm weather is luring people out-of-doors to the very places where chiggers are abundant.

"Chiggers have not been known to carry any specific disease, as ticks do," said Dr. Bishopp. "Their bites may induce a secondary infection, resulting in persistent sores or boils, though. And as you learned, they may cause you to lose sleep. You may be surprised to know that chiggers are one of the important pests of chickens and turkeys, often causing the death of young chicks or poults by attaching to them in dense masses and sucking their blood.

"A chigger is the first, or larval stage, of a large red velvet mite which is entirely harmless when mature. The chiggers hatch soon after warm weather begins, from eggs laid in the ground the previous fall. In the extreme south they may begin to cause annoyance about May first, but further north they seldom appear before the middle of June, and are most active toward August.

"It is a common belief that chiggers actually burrow into the skin, but they don't. They merely attach themselves to the skin and suck blood. Although of very minute size, the chigger can inject a large quantity of poisonous material into its host, and this is what causes the persistent itching of a chigger bite. Normally, chiggers feed on small animals, including snakes and lizards, and they may even attack birds. It's only when we go where they are that they crawl on human beings and bite them.

"It seems fairly impossible to destroy chiggers in tracts which are heavily covered with woods and undergrowth, but they can be held in check about camps and homes by clearing underbrush, vines, and so on, and keeping the grass closely cut. Dusting the vegetation and grounds with fine sulphur, applied with a dust gun, will also keep chiggers down.

"I don't know of any entirely satisfactory method for protecting the person from chiggers. If people are going into places where chiggers abound, they might wear leather leggings, or high-top shoes over the trousers. You were quite right about dusting the body and underwear with flowers of sulphur, before starting into the woodland. A light application of kerosene to the outer clothing is also a good preventive."

"I can't imagine wanting to go on a picnic smelling of kerosene," I interrupted.

"Not a picnic, perhaps," replied Dr. Bishopp, "but if you were engaged in sort of forest work, you might prefer the smell of kerosene to the later itching from the chiggers."

"One of our party wore tennis shorts and ankle socks. She was the most afflicted of all," I remarked. "I should think she would be," was all Dr. Bishopp replied. Then he added, "Persons exposed to chiggers should bathe as promptly as possible, lathering the body freely with medicated soap, and scrubbing with a coarse rag or brush to dislodge the chiggers as much as possible. The lather may be allowed to dry on the body for 15 minutes before it is removed. When you know you have acquired chiggers, a very light application of kerosene a few minutes before the bath will kill the chiggers. Even if you don't care for the smell of it. All clothing should be changed, the garments worn in the woods being brushed thoroughly, and, if possible, washed before being worn again.

"All the treatments for the bites which you mentioned - ammonia water, strong salt water, soda water, and cooling ointments, will alleviate the pain somewhat. Iodine, as well as mercurochrome is valuable as an antiseptic application on infected bites."

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